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# Representation of the Mother's Body as a Narrative Conduit for Wartime Themes in Saga

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Professor Kirtley

Comics Theory and History

16 March 2015

Representation of the Mother's Body as a  
Narrative Conduit for Wartime Themes in *Saga*

From its first panel, the comics series *Saga* is a narrative that heavily integrates themes of motherhood. Within the first few pages, readers witness the birth of the book's main character, Hazel, and the transformation of Alana into her mother. But moving beyond the initial moment of creation that launches the narrative, the story of *Saga*—which dances on the edge of a galaxy-spanning, genocidal war—employs motherhood as a conduit for wartime themes of interdependence and transgenerational memory. Through representations of the mother's body, in both its physical relation with the child and the substance it provides—milk or blood, the story is shaped by the intentions and agency of mothers in the midst of a violent conflict. As a comic, *Saga* is uniquely able to provide a more nuanced representation of these themes beyond the narration and dialogue, and the work of both co-creators, Brian K. Vaughan (writer) and Fiona Staples (illustrator), is essential to the complex balance between fabula and syuzhet. In particular, the book's art adds layers of meaning to each scene, providing both overt and subtle visual representation of themes that would be inelegant, if not impossible, to convey in prose.

The primary example of the relation of a mother's body to her child is Alana's body to Hazel. The opening sequence, in which the Landfallian Army deserter Alana gives birth with the assistance of her husband, Wreath Army deserter Marko, sets the stage for the central storyline of the book: A forbidden family unit comprised of warring factions somehow created life and

will do anything to protect it. And while Marko is an active participant in this scene, the major event is the transformation of Alana's body. In the first panel on the first page, a close view of Alana's face reveals nothing about the surroundings or the context. The reader sees only a grimacing, struggling woman expressing fear that she is defecating. The next two pages reveal the context—Alana is in labor—but also immediately pull the focus back to her sensations and experience of what is happening to her body, this time in the form of arousal. While the situation clearly revolves around a birth, the reader's introduction to Alana takes a wholly self-possessed perspective: Alana never asks about the child in her dialogue and the art also never reveals the birth itself.

Without showing the physical act of Alana becoming a mother through Hazel's delivery, on page 5 of "Chapter 1" the transformation happens in a sequence of wordless panels in which Alana sees her daughter, takes her into her arms, and just a few pages after expressing disgust for the bodily functions inherent in childbirth, she pulls aside her dress to breastfeed Hazel. The silence of the moment is unique for the book, which in just a few pages has included dialogue in every panel. The technique clearly illustrates the weight of the moment. Something in Alana has shifted, and it will impact the whole narrative moving forward because, in fact, two new characters have been introduced: Hazel and her mother (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Alana becomes Hazel's mother. [Vaughan, Brian K. (w), Fiona Staples (a)] *Saga* "Chapter 1" (14 Mar. 2012), Image Comics.

The scene immediately following Hazel's birth cements the relationship between these two new characters. Although she has left Alana's womb, her mother's body will continue to act as a protective vessel for Hazel as the war continually approaches their doorstep. From the moment she is placed into her arms and throughout the firefight between military troops that follows, Alana never removes both her arms from around Hazel. And while Alana's body is inadequate to provide escape from their location by flying, during the escalation of the fight she turns her back to the gun-wielding assailants to cocoon the newborn, offering her body as a barrier. The art again provides an additional layer to these events, as in nearly every panel

Alana's face is obscured or only roughly sketched, even as other characters are fully illustrated. What is important about Alana in each panel is the portrayal of her body melded nearly seamlessly with Hazel's. She does not exist as an individual character in the scene, and the visual *syuzhet* of the art makes it clear that her purpose—to protect Hazel—is paramount to her unique identity.

The physical interdependence between Alana and Hazel represents the greater theme of interdependence between the warring worlds Landfall and Wreath. Landfall, the largest planet in the system, and its moon, Wreath, wage an ongoing conflict across the system, fighting on distant planets and conscripting alien races to fight proxy battles. The impetus behind the war is not made clear in the first four volumes (24 chapters) but the impetus of the central family unit is Alana and Marko's collective belief that a loving relationship between the worlds is the only hope for peace—represented through their love, marriage, and the birth of Hazel, who is the only cross-breed between their cultures portrayed in the book. This representation of peace between Landfall and Wreath threatens the power structures behind the war, which dispatch assassins and armies to pursue the family, kill the lovers, and capture Hazel. It is clear through the response of the governments and sheer size of the war machine that supports the conflict that Landfall and Wreath are essential to each other—completely interdependent not only physically but likely politically and economically. The sustenance these heavenly bodies provide each other is visually represented in the narrative of *Saga* through Hazel providing an identity for Alana as a mother and Alana providing her body as protection and sustenance.

This representation of interdependence is best illustrated by the repeated imagery of Alana breastfeeding Hazel. Commonly applied to visual representation in film, the theory of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan notes that images can be substituted for unconscious

material in a way that resembles metaphor (Ryan 49). In this way, images of Hazel breastfeeding are used within the story to represent the bond between Alana and Hazel and the interdependence between Landfall and Wreath, but also extradiegetically on the covers of primary entry points for readers: “Chapter 1,” “Volume 1,” and the “Deluxe Edition Volume 1,” which collects the first 18 chapters. The covers are representative of each book’s content without specifically referencing a panel or situation within the narrative. In this way, they transcend the fabula to serve as visual syuzhet, and in these cases illuminate the theme of interdependence (see fig. 2).



Fig 2. Covers of *Saga* “Chapter 1” and the “Deluxe Edition.” [Vaughan, Brian K. (w), Fiona Staples (a)] *Saga* “Chapter 1” (14 Mar. 2012) and “Deluxe Edition Volume 1” (19 Nov. 2014), Image Comics: Cover.

The cover for “Chapter 1” (which also served as the cover for the first collected volume) shows a unique representation of the female body for a comic store shelf: Alana’s breast is almost completely exposed, but the purpose is to nurture her newborn. She holds her head

defiantly high and loosely holds a weapon in her free hand. Her husband, Marko, has an arm around her, but alertly looks away from her body. The message is clear that her body is not for herself or for her romantic partner, but provides protection and sustenance for her baby. The background features a starry sphere that gives their bodies the look of objects firmly holding their positions in space. This cover caused minor controversy when it was released, prompting criticism from the comics artist Dave Dorman, who wrote on his blog that the cover was designed for shock value and did not hold breastfeeding as sufficiently “sacred.” In 2012, when “Chapter 1” was released, the appropriateness of public breastfeeding was a politicized topic in the U.S. However, neither Staples nor Vaughan apologized for the cover, and even used it for the first collected volume of the series (Wheeler).

Two years later, when they released the “Deluxe Edition Volume 1,” Staples produced a new cover that more clearly shows Hazel breastfeeding, but also more clearly ties the theme of interdependence to the relationship between Hazel and Alana’s body. Viewed in the foreground is Alana’s breast, with Hazel to the left, feeding. In the background are Landfall and Wreath—suspended in space, peacefully orbiting, and juxtaposed in the same manner as Alana and Hazel. Vaughan and Staples later stated as a panel at the 2014 San Diego Comic-Con that the cover was a response to the initial controversy: “Just doubling down on our breastfeeding stance, aren’t we?” said Staples; and “Some stores won’t even rack the first volume because the breastfeeding is controversial, but... fuck them.” said Vaughan (Clemente). Despite the real-world political stance of the creators, however, the artistic craft of the cover clearly also serves the extradiegesis by representing interdependence, one of the primary themes of the first story arc.

Over the arc of *Saga*’s first 18 chapters, Hazel grows and a shift begins to occur in Alana’s perspective of her body. While she is again breastfeeding, Alana and Marko have a

conversation about Alana entering the workforce to provide for the family. Offering resistance to the idea of how she could pursue her former career goal as an actor while also providing for Hazel, Alana refers to herself as a “lactation machine.” Despite this seemingly negative connotation related to her role in breastfeeding, Staples’ art in the panel shows Alana is relaxed and happy with the conversation. She is neither ashamed of her choice to serve Hazel’s needs with her body, nor upset by the possibility of trying something else. This is a crossroads for the character, and while the dialogue represents more resistance from Alana, the art shows her willingness to take the new path. That new path, however, separates Alana from her family physically, and the exterior forces affecting the family’s well-being amass in step with Alana reclaiming her body as a part of her individual identity.

The shift of Alana’s body as an essential part of her role as Hazel’s mother back to part of herself happens in “Chapter 20,” when she begins to use the drug aptly named Fadeaway. Before she first uses Fadeaway, Alana is reminded that she has a daughter to care for, to which she replies, “Not for another six hours... I haven’t taken a single day off since Hazel was born.” The following sequence represents Alana’s reclamation of her body in a manner reminiscent of the scene in which she becomes Hazel’s mother. Again employing the rarely used dialogue-free panels, the two-page spread illustrates a major change in the representation of Alana’s body: from that of Hazel’s mother to Alana’s individual vessel (see fig. 3).



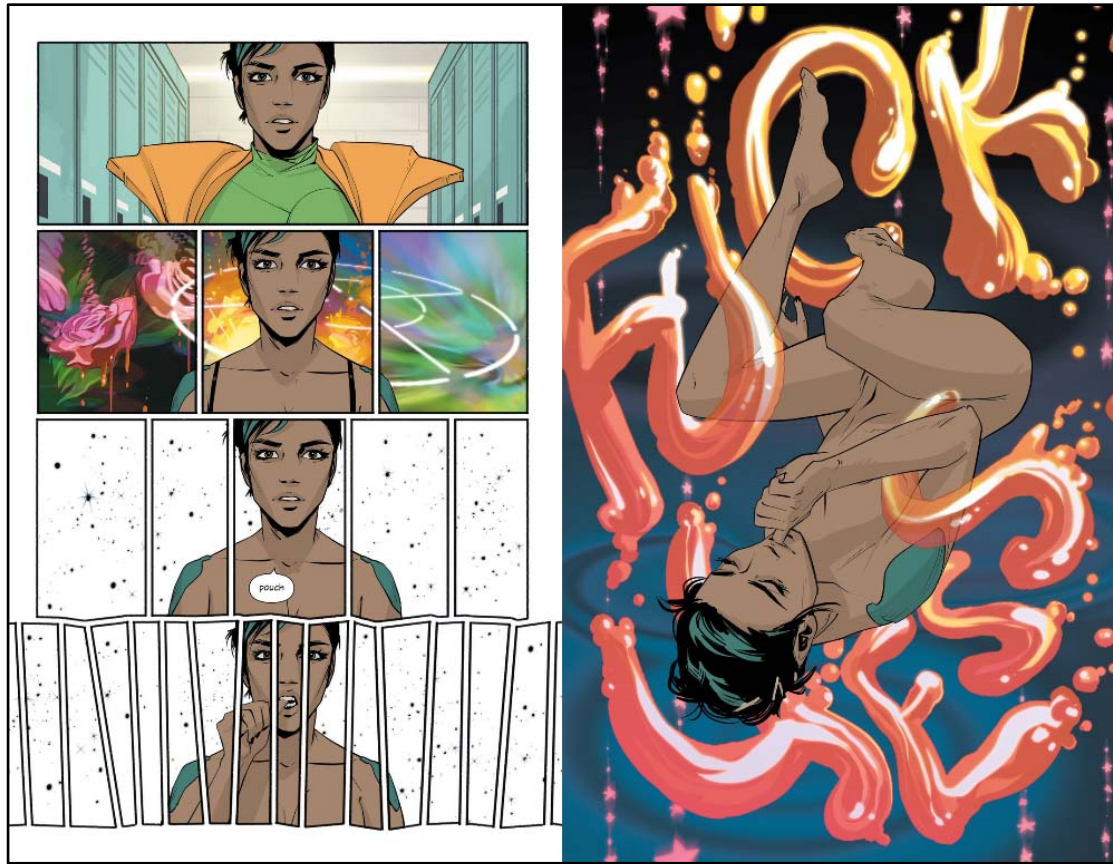


Fig. 3. Alana reclaims her body as a vessel of her individual identity. [Vaughan, Brian K. (w), Fiona Staples (a)] *Saga* “Chapter 20” (25 June 2014), Image Comics.

After this shift, Alana, who is almost never shown separate from Hazel in the first 18 chapters, is not shown feeding Hazel and in fact does not have physical contact with her daughter again until “Chapter 23,” and only then touches her when an intruder in the family’s home grabs the toddler. Just a couple of pages prior to this physical reunion, before her reaction was forced by the potential for violence, Alana was unable to touch Hazel even to comfort her, instead recoiling into her own despair. This breakdown in the interdependence of Alana and Hazel coincided with the same break between Alana and Marko and introduced instability to their peaceful alliance, represented symbolically in Hazel. Without the family’s committal to their dangerous ideals and without continuing to nurture the interdependence between Wreath and

Landfall, even the relationship between Alana and Marko devolves to the point of physical violence during an argument. Peace is an untenable thing between warring worlds, requiring selflessness and commitment from all parties, just as represented by Alana's body as "belonging" to Hazel or to herself.

Alana is not the only mother in *Saga*, and where her body and the milk she provides represent interdependence during wartime, Klara's body and blood represent isolation and transgenerational memory trauma. Klara, Marko's mother who joins the family after mistakenly coming to avenge him, is a former soldier who firmly believes that Landfall is committing genocide against Wreath. And, again, while the reasons behind the war are not explained in *Saga*, the similarity between the conflict and the Holocaust is clearly an intentional part of the narrative. From Marko's father, Barr, the reader learns that Klara's mother died in "Langencamp"—a name reminiscent of Nazi death camps. In an article exploring the generational discourse of memory among Germans post-World War II, Sigrid Weigel explains, "'Survival' itself circumscribes a clear, unequivocal forming of a position arising from the relation to the camps and the past immediacy and simultaneity to the murdered people who occupy the blind spot of origin within the genealogy of the survivors: the nameless and often unburied dead mark a gap and, at the same time, the beginning of mourning and trauma that extend over generations," (271). And while generational survivors of the Holocaust are unable to actually witness the atrocities committed during the Shoah, in *Saga*, Klara's blood provides a young Marko that opportunity.

By cutting herself to spill blood on the soil of their home moon, Klara and Barr show Marko an organic projection of the final battle fought on Wreath. As a child he experiences what Weigel calls the transmission of "transgenerational trauma," an explicit lesson provided by his parents to shape his outlook as a member of their race and their warrior family (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Klara spills her blood to show a young Marko the atrocities committed against Wreath by Landfallian soldiers. [Vaughan, Brian K. (w), Fiona Staples (a)] *Saga* "Chapter 7" (14 Nov. 2012), Image Comics.

With Klara standing apart from Marko and framed by the massive silhouette of Landfall, Marko's mother is able to remove the "blind spot" from the transgenerational memory of their family. This lesson and the blood Klara spills to provide it also relate to the extradiegetic narrative of the cover for "Chapter 7": A blood-soaked Marko, dressed in an outfit almost identical to what Klara wears in the flashback, holds his family's sword and stands calmly

between the wings of three dead Landfallian soldiers. *Saga*'s narrative never includes Marko's time as a soldier, but the cover is another element of visual syuzhet supporting the representation of themes of war and the relationship between the child and its mother's body.

Another distinct difference in the representation of Klara's and Alana's bodies as a mothers is Klara's lack of physical interaction with other characters throughout the book. Alana's close physical bond with Hazel provides the basis of the theme of interdependence, where Klara's physical separation represents the theme of isolation, especially from characters connected in any way to Landfall—the home of her oppressors. At the panel level, Staples' art singles Klara out as the most isolated of all characters. After what is an understandable standoffishness when she first joins the family on their rocketship home, it becomes apparent through the visual syuzhet—while never being addressed in the fabula—that Klara will not make affectionate physical contact with anyone. Her first physical contact with Marko is in “Chapter 7” when she firmly slaps him soon after they are reunited. In “Chapter 8” she reluctantly offers her hand to help Marko perform a spell, but through the art is clearly not eager for the contact with her son, whom she had believed was dead just a few hours previously. While she was ready to kill to avenge Marko, Klara never provides the physical comfort of motherhood. It is unclear if this is just a character trait, but juxtaposed with her adamant hatred of Landfall, the physical separation of her body as a mother from her child is representative of Wreath's isolation from Landfall culturally and historically. The transgenerational memory is too strong within Klara to overcome even her son's connection with a Landfallian, and though it happens while she is grieving his death, the only character she is ever shown making affectionate physical contact with in the series is her husband.

Aside from her physical separation from Marko, the transgenerational rift between Wreath and Landfall extends to the representation of Klara's relationship with Hazel. While she is not outwardly hateful toward Hazel and she sometimes is toward Alana, the only times she is shown making physical contact with her granddaughter there is no affection demonstrated through the art. Additionally, these moments of contact happen only through necessity: once in "Chapter 13" when Hazel needs her diaper changed and once in "Chapter 23" when she is throwing a tantrum and leaning on Klara, whose body language shows ambivalence and even resistance to being touched by Hazel. This separation further demonstrates the theme of isolation in war. Klara is unable to accept the peace Alana and Marko strive for, which is represented through Hazel. If she ever wanted the war to stop, the pain she feels from generations of oppression would only be sated by the complete annihilation of Landfall, and even appeals to the protection of family do nothing to sway her ingrained combative response (see fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Klara advocates fighting instead of hiding for safety during an attack. [Vaughan, Brian K. (w), Fiona Staples (a)] *Saga* "Chapter 17" (18 Dec. 2013), Image Comics.

In "Chapter 17," when the home where the family is staying is attacked by a Landfallian ally, Klara wants to engage in combat and Marko and Alana appeal to her sense of maternalism

and family to remain out of the conflict. In the following sequence, Klara ignores these pleas and enters the fight, holding to her principles and ideals of behavior during wartime, but incurring an injury and failing to save her friend in the process. A distinctive element of her response to Marko's appeal is portrayed through both the layout and the lettering of the scene. Marko is holding Hazel between himself and Klara, inserting an ideological rift that can't be overcome. Alana is separated completely from the group in a different panel, participating in the discussion, but not part of the same "picture" as the Wreath family. The lettering in the scene also demonstrates Klara's thoughts on the appeal to her maternal instinct. She practically spits the word "mother" back at Marko—highlighted in quotations—to divide his use of the word and her feelings toward the institution in that moment.

Klara's agency of her own body and the blood she will spill to uphold her wartime values draw a clear line of separation between her and Alana, and also in the creators' representation of wartime themes through these mothers' bodies. Staples adds layers to Vaughan's narrative that illuminate the themes of interdependence and transgenerational memory between the family members themselves, but also Landfall and Wreath as a whole. Outside the comics format, the visual *syuzhet* and extradiegetic narrative essential to this representation would not be possible, and without the seamless integration of these themes into the art and portrayal of motherhood, the craft would lack the elegance and complexity that make *Saga* a powerful and effective narrative of family and war.

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